

communist authoritarianism, welcome as this was in itself, has not turned out to be an unmixed blessing, nor a prelude to unmixed blessings either.

Intellectually its impact in the Western world has been dreadful. We have been told yet again that 'Marxism is dead' by all kinds of people who had never willingly conceded that it was alive. And the corollary of this is the claim that 'we are all liberals now', and even that liberal capitalist democracy is the final political and economic goal to which all human history has been leading. The revival of liberal economics from the mid-1970s onwards has now been compounded by the proclaimed victory of capitalism over communism, or liberal democracy over socialist dictatorship. Given all that, given the particularly acute problems of the British Labour Party, which many people have argued, perhaps correctly, for more than a decade, is in long-term decline; given the general tendency of social democracy to forget if not openly renounce its original objectives and drift rightwards towards a would-be comfortable accommodation with capitalism – given all this, is it any wonder that social democrats are no longer clear in their own minds what socialism actually is or means, and are apt, or prefer, to think about it in the terms of established liberalism? It was surely entirely typical of these developments that when Neil Kinnock was asked why there was no mention of socialism in Labour's 1992 election manifesto, he replied by saying that everything in it was based on our fundamental socialist belief in the liberty of the individual (or words to that effect).

That belief or value is, of course, the central value of liberalism, not socialism; and it would have been perfectly possible for both Ashdown and Major to invoke it as central to their conception of liberalism or conservatism. In other words, it tells us nothing about what is distinctive about socialism, as opposed to what it may have in common with other ideologies. It is true that the 'New Liberalism', from T. H. Green onwards, did revise and enlarge the concept of freedom, and indeed the philosophy and agenda of liberalism, in ways which pushed liberalism towards socialism; so that there is, as Roy Hattersley showed in *Choose Freedom*, a way of thinking about freedom which does then distinguish socialism from traditional, conventional liberalism, which still views state or public action with some suspicion, still tends to think of freedom as 'the silence of the laws' or as 'an area of non-interference'.

But even allowing for all this, a socialism which elevates freedom or

liberty to the position of its supreme or central value is conceding too much to liberalism. For, however sophisticated the conception of freedom that is employed, what it implies is that the central political aim is to increase the autonomy of the individual, and that no other goal is as important as, let alone more important than, this. This raises a whole range of questions – about both the desirability and feasibility of ever-growing individual autonomy and, at another level, about the very concept of the individual which, as Iain Hampsher-Monk points out in his essay, is called in question by a variety of ways of thinking about people and society, some at least of which would seem to be much closer to socialist thinking than the liberal individualism which underpins the preoccupation with personal freedom or autonomy.

One of the most obviously debatable assumptions inherent in John Stuart Mill's attempt to combine liberalism with utilitarianism is the assumption that freedom and happiness, or if not happiness then some kind of profound personal sense of fulfilment, go together, both for the individual and for society as a whole. Freedom is the precondition of progress; but the autonomous person also derives deep satisfaction from the fact that she or he is autonomous, in control of his or her own life. Now these are both empirical propositions in principle – which is not to say that we could ever finally prove them to be clearly true or false, of course. I think we can safely admit that both propositions have a lot of truth in them. But neither is as self-evidently true as Mill seems to have thought. All the relationships we enter into, and especially family relationships, carry with them obligations, commitments, ties, which entail very considerable losses in freedom and autonomy in all kinds of very obvious ways. Why then do we involve ourselves in them if not because we know that such relationships, although they often bring pain and misery, are also the source of the deepest and most durable happiness and personal security? Autonomy, self-direction, freedom make a strong appeal to those, especially perhaps young people and many women, who feel themselves to be trapped or cramped within established institutions, communities or networks which do not allow them the scope to 'be themselves'. But consider, on the other hand, the plight of both the very young and the very old in the more anonymous urban environments. Consider the old-age pensioner living alone in rented accommodation which has a generally transient population. He or she would probably appreciate a good deal less autonomy and freedom because in this situation they are effectively synonyms for emptiness, social isolation and neglect.

Of course one can construct counter-examples – of the gay man or lesbian who escapes from the censorious intolerance of family and village or small town to the relative freedom of the same big city which is so harshly indifferent to the lonely pensioner. I am not, of course, denying the value of freedom and autonomy. I am saying that they are not in themselves an adequate prescription for personal happiness or even self-realisation, and socialists cannot afford to believe that they are. Socialism cannot afford to lose sight of those other dimensions of the good society to which it was classically committed, and which its founders and creators well understood.

Nor can socialism be built upon the foundations of individualism, whether ontological or ethical. The concept of the individual is neither neutral nor banal. The idea that it is a kind of obvious truth was well expressed by that classic liberal writer, E. M. Forster:

... as for individualism – there seems no way of getting off this, even if one wanted to. The dictator-hero can grind down his citizens till they are all alike but he cannot melt them into a single man ... they are obliged to be born separately, and to die separately ... The memory of birth and the expectation of death always lurk within the human being, making him separate from his fellows ...

But about three hundred years earlier John Donne put quite a different construction upon death. Because it is the one destination to which we all travel, it reminds us of our common fate, not our separateness:

that privat and *retirid* man, that thought himselfe his owne for ever, and never came forth, must in his dust of the grave bee published and ... bee mingled with the dust of every high way ...²

I think I am right in saying that the ancient Greeks had no word corresponding to 'individual', and that the privacy which is of such importance to modern liberalism did not seem to them to be an important or privileged condition. It was in fact one of deprivation, as Hannah Arendt pointed out, indicated by the word itself. The word 'idiot' signified a purely private person, and it was the public sphere which was the area of freedom.³ And we need only turn to the opening pages of Aristotle's *Politics* to see that what we think of as essentially a rather too fanciful, if not actually sinister, metaphor – that of the body politic and its members – is for him a perfect image of the relation between the single human person (or man) and the community of *polis* to which he belongs. You could not be a human being outside

society. You would have to be either sub- or super-human, either a beast or a god.

Bentham disliked this metaphor intensely – rightly from his own point of view. ‘The community is a fictitious *body*, composed of the individual persons who are considered as constituting as it were its *members*.’ Note the ‘fictitious’ and ‘as it were’. This is not an image that Bentham wishes to endorse in any way. ‘The interest of the community then is, what? – the sum of the interests of the several members who compose it ... Individual interests are the only real interests.’ When Mrs Thatcher announced that ‘There is no such thing as society. There are only individuals and their families’, she was, apart from the revealingly inconsistent reference to ‘the family’, closer to Benthamite or liberal atomism (of the methodological individualist kind preached by Hayek, Popper, Berlin and others) than she was to traditional conservatism, as represented by Burke: ‘Individuals pass like shadows, but the commonwealth is fixed and stable.’

Liberal individualism thus does not represent a universal perception of the relations between persons and society, as so many of its advocates fondly imagine or assume. On the contrary, it is, if anything, the historical exception to the general rule which sees men and women as essentially social beings, caught up in the web of relationships and institutions which compose a society, and unavoidably dependent upon social interaction for their very existence as human beings. Socialism and communism, as the very terms suggest, belong to that family of ideologies. And they were in origin an attempt to create a modern, post-industrial vision of community which would not only replace nostalgia for the hierachial pre-industrial society praised and upheld by Burke and the conservatives, but also provide an alternative to the miserably atomised and conflict-ridden conglomerations which capitalism was producing in place of the old feudal order.

I do not myself see how socialism can convert its basic view of the world into one which embodies or reflects essentially the liberal individualist perspective without ceasing to be socialism. This may not worry practical politicians, but it ought to worry socialist philosophers. And, in fact, it ought to worry the politicians as well, because the gap between philosophical fundamentals and the attraction of public support is not the gulf which they, in their more anti-intellectual moods, may suppose it to be.

There is, I think, plenty of evidence, perhaps including the result of the British 1992 election, to suggest that the public do respond to

parties which clearly stand for something basic and big. They want a clear image of a party, and that means knowing what values or principles a party stands for. For example, take Crosland's view that the core of socialism is 'equality': socialism is about equality. That may not be an adequate definition of socialism, and it may not be one with which everyone will agree. But it has two virtues. One is that it is simple and easily grasped and remembered. The other is that it is distinctive. No liberal or conservative leader is likely to copy it. Indeed conservatives are more likely to proclaim their perennial belief in *inequality*. The point of this digression is a simple one: a party needs a clear and distinctive set of values in order to command popular support and allegiance. Philosophy and political effectiveness are not so far apart as might be supposed.

So individualism, and a consequent stress on personal freedom and free choice, do not offer anything distinctive for the Labour Party or the Left, and the temptation to embrace them, just because they became the stock-in-trade of the Right-dominated 1980s, should have been, and ought still to be, firmly resisted. To fight on this terrain is to fight on the enemy's ground.

I would like to add a word here against the current cult of *choice*, which is obviously seen and presented as the embodiment of increased personal freedom. This is, at first glance, difficult to do. To deny choice seems to be arrogant and authoritarian. And perhaps in one version of the ideal world, one of abundance and unlimited resources – a world which looks less and less possible for ecological reasons if no others – there could be choice right across the spectrum of human needs and desires. But in practical terms the pursuit of choice is in many areas not only delusory, but actively damaging. Parents ought to have a choice of schools to which to send their children, it is suggested. Fine, if this was a choice between different educational patterns and philosophies offered by equally good, well-funded and well-supported schools. But that is not the way it is, or will be. Choice of schools means choice between markedly better and worse schools within the state system, or between the state system and private schools for those who can afford the latter. Choice then enhances the benefits and advantages already available to the rich and privileged, leaving the children of the poor and the working class even more disadvantaged than they were before. And even if that were not so, even if the choice between good and less good schools was open equally to working-class parents and children, it would still be the case that those who lost out

in this process of choice would actually lose because of the wide disparities between schools in the state system. Personally, as a parent, I do not want a choice of schools: I simply want a good local school to which my children can happily go.

The same applies in areas like health care. I do not want or need a choice of doctors, hospitals, consultants. I simply want the local provision to be adequate to deal with such health problems as may arise in my family. The focus on choice and competition, in this area as in others, even without its predictable, inevitable, class dimension, means that some people will lose out, will have to make do with second- or third-class care, attention and facilities; and that runs against the principles of fairness and social justice which are supposed to underpin public services like the National Health Service and state schooling.

In some cases I think we should go further, and recognise (and publicise) the virtues of compulsion. I am thinking in particular of the system of National Insurance. The Major government, following the Thatcherite agenda, is clearly working towards a situation in which each individual is responsible for his or her own insurance in respect of health, benefits and pensions. It would be a matter of free personal choice, and the person who chose not to save or insure against old age would simply have to face the consequences of that choice – destitution or dependence on such charity as might be available. This was the nineteenth century situation, and it is the utopia of the more whole-hearted economic liberals. For all I know, that might have been the situation approved of by Mill, who held as a general principle that it was always better that something is done voluntarily rather than by compulsion or by the state. For my part, I know very well that I am not capable of putting aside money voluntarily towards an old-age pension, for both personal and economic reasons. I suspect that most of us are in the same position. We ought, therefore, to be profoundly grateful that we are *compelled* to make this provision. It seems to be a clear, classic case of a situation in which enlightened self-interest is, or is likely to be, in conflict with our immediate desires and interests, and where the state and the law act on our behalf, in our own long-term interest.

A good deal of law and regulation – traffic regulations, for example – can surely be justified in the same way. All of us benefit, overall, from speed limits, parking regulations, traffic lights, etc., even if there are particular occasions when they are a hindrance to our purposes, which may even be good ones (we are rushing someone to hospital).

And the element of compulsion is welcome, because we could not trust ourselves always to comply with a general rule which was voluntary, even if we recognised its rightness and wisdom. If this is correct, then I think it follows that a good deal of nonsense is talked about the supposed virtues of voluntarism. Choice and competition do not necessarily and in all circumstances benefit the user, or society as a whole. I suspect that there is little or no evidence that the imposition of choice in relation to local bus services since 1986 has resulted in improved services, let alone lower fares. And as for railways, one only has to compare the relative rationality of the oligopoly/monopoly situation that emerged in twentieth-century Britain with the costly and destructive absurdities of nineteenth-century competition, when two or three different companies would all construct their separate routes and run their separate trains between, let us say, Nottingham and Sheffield, or even London and Manchester. Similarly, if we had genuine competition between the various private telephone companies, they would presumably all be digging up the roads to lay their separate cables to their customers. Thank God for regulation and quasi-monopoly.

So strongly has the current run against 'statism' and planning in recent years, even on the Left, that it has become difficult to say a word in defence of the conscious rationality of planning as opposed to the supposedly self-regulating freedom and democracy of market choice. It is time, and past time, to buck this absurd trend, and to reassert the principle that there are many situations in which publicly owned and controlled monopoly – with whatever safeguards and mechanisms are necessary to provide for accountability and openness – is the best way of ensuring fair and efficient provision for the public.

The pernicious effects of individualism can also be perceived in the definitions of well-being, or well-offness, which Labour as much as the parties to its Right has employed in recent years. The claim, during the 1992 election, that eight out of ten families would be better off as a result of Labour's tax plans simply accepted the conservative (and Conservative) definition of being better off in terms of having more money in your pocket or pay packet. But it is and always has been of the essence of social democracy – let alone anything more radical – to put forward a definition of well-being which is *not* so crudely and narrowly defined, which recognises that you can be better off in real terms, in terms of having a better standard of living, even if, as a result of taxation, you have less money in your pocket. Money in

your pocket will not, unless you are phenomenally rich, buy you a park, swings and a slide, or an art gallery or museum, let alone a clean water supply or drains, or paved roads, or street lighting, etc., etc.

All this is elementary, and was understood more than a century ago by the first Fabians. It is understood well enough in principle even by today's Labour Party; and it is understood by the people who have shown, in countless surveys, that they are in principle willing to pay higher taxes as the price of better public services, and who also responded positively to what I thought was the Liberal Democrats' admirably open policy of proposing to add a penny to income tax to pay for improvements in education. It is therefore all the more regrettable that the Labour Party, which ought to and probably does know better, should have conceded so much – and in vain – to crude individualist definitions of well-being in terms of post-tax money incomes.

But the most important choice is not that between alternative definitions of individual well-being – a way of thinking that might, and in the case of a minority actually does, lead some people to calculate, perhaps correctly, that they are better off with more money, since they can always buy better education, more prompt health care, and so forth, while relying on taxation to provide them with drains, roads, street lighting, museums and other services. So long as one is content to argue on the terrain of self-interest, there is no answer to such calculations; and in real politics, it has to be accepted that in radically unequal capitalist societies there will always be substantial numbers of people who will think and act on such a basis.

The only long-term hope for socialism or even social democracy lies in persuading significant numbers of people to look beyond simple and basic calculations of self-interest, and to consider how their own good and welfare, in general terms if not specific ones, are bound up with the good of society as a whole – in a word, with the common good; to the extent that they will even be prepared to put that good before and above their own immediate interest and benefit, provided always that basic principles of fairness and social justice are being observed. That cumbersome and qualified statement reflects, in a rather unsatisfactory way, some of the difficulties which nevertheless attach to any idea of the general interest or the common good.

Everyone is aware of the ways in which such concepts or phrases are exploited and abused. In British politics these usually take the form of invocations of 'the national interest', in the name of which wages have

to be kept low, or public expenditure has to be cut back, or pension and benefit increases withheld or postponed. Invariably these sacrifices are called for from, or imposed upon, those who have least in absolute terms to sacrifice but most, proportionally, to lose. All too often it has been a Labour Government which has required such sacrifices.

People are rightly cynical, or at least sceptical, about such rhetoric. It is the kind of thing that gives 'the common good' a bad name, and it prompts the kind of questions that Bentham undoubtedly would have asked. Who gains, exactly, from 'the national interest'? Which individuals actually benefit, and how many? There must be a relationship between such supposed general benefits and actual tangible benefits to actual people.

On the other hand, this line of scepticism can easily be carried to individualist extremes. Thus Isaiah Berlin has quoted Bentham with approval on the absurdity of preferring 'the man who is not to him who is', and of 'torment [ing] the living, under pretence of promoting the happiness of them who are not born, and who may never be born'.⁴ The idea that those who are yet unborn are some kind of 'metaphysical' invention, who ought to be disregarded by the 'empirical' liberal, is not only absurd – it is irresponsible in the extreme. We have to bear in mind the interests of future generations and make provision for them; and in fact this is done, however inadequately. Ecologists and 'greens' have rightly drawn our attention to how much more needs to be done in this respect, how we can no longer continue to exploit and abuse the natural environment of the planet without endangering the very survival of the human species. This may mean sacrifices in the present for the sake of that future. Such sacrifices cannot be called for or justified in terms of the self-interest of existing persons, but only in terms of some such concept as the common good. So, although it is undeniable that such ideas are exploited in unjustifiable ways by unscrupulous politicians, it is nevertheless also the case that they are meaningful, and cannot be dispensed with by any enlightened or farsighted politics.

Not long ago I got involved in an argument in the press with a free market opponent of public subsidy for opera (which happens to be a particular interest of mine). He summed up my position (I quote from memory) as 'Mr Arblaster thinks that other people should pay for his pleasures'. He obviously thought this was a terrific put-down, but he was quite right. I do, just as I think that we, as tax- and rate-payers, should also pay for parks, and swimming pools and libraries, even if, as

in the case of swimming pools, I do not myself use them. The logic of his approach is a mean-minded self-interest: ‘why should I pay for facilities and services which I do not personally use or benefit from?’ Thanks to the revival of economic liberalism, this kind of petty selfishness is now far more common in British society. In the end it would mean that those adults who are not parents or whose children have derived all the benefit they could from the educational system, and who had done the same themselves, would claim that they ought not to be supporting the education of other people and other people’s children. The healthy person would resent helping to pay for the care of the chronically sick. And so on. Mean-minded examples can easily be multiplied.

I do not believe we can have such a thing as a society at all without the recognition that there are certain common goods which have to be provided collectively and without accepting that the provision of these common goods may well benefit some people, or some groups, more than others. The second point is important because it implies a recognition of the plural character of society. It avoids the trap of identifying the common good with the good or benefit of all or of the majority. It simply asserts the principle that society accepts that there are a range of institutions and services to which it commits itself collectively, whether because, as in the cases of health, education and clean water, they are indispensable to any decent human life, or because they are part of what makes up ‘the quality of life’ – as is the case with libraries, theatres and opera companies.

I have argued that individualism – at least of the kind portrayed here – is destructive of the general good and even, in some cases, of personal happiness. I also want to suggest that pluralism does not offer us a way of avoiding the notion of the common good. Of course it is important, as was indicated in the previous paragraph, that the variety of interests, cultures and life patterns within any large-scale modern society should be recognised and accepted as legitimate. And in fact even the established democracies of the West continue to resist the logic of pluralism in many ways – for example in claims that Britain is essentially a Christian country, or that the United States is essentially an English-speaking society.

Much more could be said along those lines. But still, when all is said and done, there are some questions of value which have to be resolved collectively in one direction or another. A society cannot be totally pluralistic or totally tolerant without disintegrating. For example, it

has to make some collective decisions about the kind of education it wants its children to get. This issue is currently raised by the demand that the state should legitimate and subsidise Muslim schools as it does Anglican, Catholic, Non-conformist and Jewish schools. Put that way, it sounds like a reasonable demand, given that, unlike the United States, we do not require education to be conducted on a secular basis. But the problematic aspect of the demand lies in the kind of education that strict Muslims may want to give their female children. If it is an education in direct conflict with the principle of genuinely equal opportunities for men and women, then it is not a kind of education which this society can permit.

There are plenty of other issues of this kind. Abortion is another obvious case, which is dividing Irish society in a very sharp way. It is an issue which has to be resolved one way or the other. You either have a society based on Catholic principles, which disallows abortion under all or most circumstances, or you have a liberal society which accepts that there is at least a limited right to abortion for those who do not have moral or religious objections to it. Certain decisions have to be made by or on behalf of the whole society – and a referendum may be the effective as well as the most democratic way of making such decisions. These decisions then represent that society's most central or fundamental values, its own perception of its common good. Pluralism does not enable us to evade those decisions and commitments.

The argument here is that no society, even the most liberal, can dispense with some conception of the common good, which will be an expression of its collective values – values that will probably not be universally shared. My further argument has been that this is not, as liberals, and certainly economic liberals, may think, a necessary evil, but a positive virtue in society. Only a society with a strong and positive conception of, and commitment to, the common good can avoid declining into the jungle which is produced by the dominance of individualism. That jungle exists, more or less, in the United States and, for all I know, in other advanced capitalist societies. Some parts of the jungle are quite attractive. It is possible to construct – quite literally – protected enclaves within which life can be pleasant and prosperous. But the stockaded mansions of Beverly Hills and the well-guarded suburban housing developments are themselves an expression of a society which has been atomised and fragmented by the uninhibited pursuit of self-interest, with all the callousness,

ruthlessness and, ultimately, lawlessness that that implies. Outside the stockades there is squalor, decay, despair and crime. That is the direction in which Britain, under its Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite leadership, is steadily moving; and it is no wonder, as Martin Hollis points out in his essay, that the traditionalist and perceptive Tories are worried, and have made efforts to breathe life into the dying concept of 'citizenship'. But the jungle has no citizens, only inhabitants. To have citizens you need a city, a *polis*, a place with common goals and a sense of its collective common good. Despite the siren voices of the centrists who, in the wake of Labour's election defeat are urging – as they always do – *more* concessions to individualism and further dilution, if not outright renunciation, of collectivism, the purpose of socialism remains to tame and civilise the jungle, not to compete in offering tastier bait to the wild animals which inhabit it.

NOTES

1. See the citations from the *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, and *The Spectator*, by Robin Blackburn in 'The Ruins of Westminster', *New Left Review* 191, (January–February 1992) p. 8.
2. I have here and in what follows recycled some material from my *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1984) pp. 15–16 and 22.
3. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1958) p. 38.
4. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969) footnote, p. 171.